



# WisTech Assistive Technology Program

Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services • Division of Disability and Elder Services

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## Maintaining Your Wheelchair

Your wheelchair allows you to be mobile and active. If your equipment breaks down, it can be an inconvenience, a hardship, and may even put you in danger. You can help keep your chair operating and maintained by being knowledgeable about your wheelchair, taking care of problems before they put you out of commission, and having a handy list of providers that you can rely on for repairs, parts, and maintenance.

### **Take charge of the care of your own wheelchair.**

As the owner and operator of your wheelchair, you will usually be the first person to notice when your chair is not functioning properly. You may not be able to perform the basic daily and weekly cleaning and upkeep yourself, but you can set up a routine that can be followed by your caregivers, family members or others to monitor your chair for problems. To keep your equipment running smoothly you will need to take care of minor problems, as well as having your service dealer take care of major repairs.

### **Know your equipment and be organized.**

The process of maintaining your wheelchair begins on the day that your new chair is delivered. Read your warranty and talk with your service provider about maintaining your wheelchair. You will be better able to handle problems as they arise if you have the following information and tools available and close at hand:

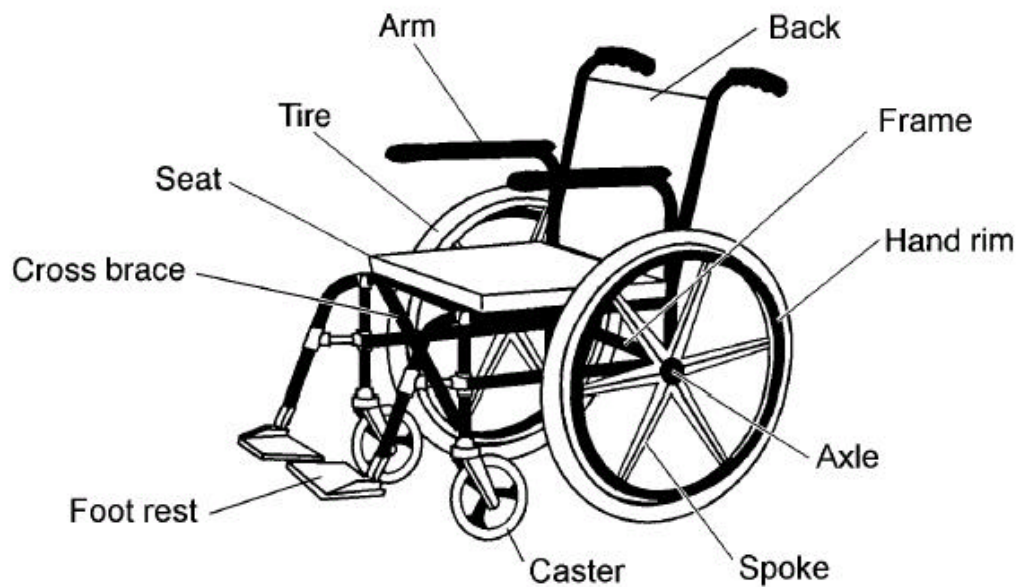
- **Owner's manual** – This book contains valuable information about your wheelchair. It describes how to care for your equipment, items that are covered under warranty and the tools that you will need for simple maintenance. Keep your owner's manual in a safe place and refer to it often for guidance.
- **Set of Tools** - Assemble and store a set of tools that you will need to have on hand for maintenance and emergencies. The following items can be attached to your chair in a pouch or box: Phillips and flat head screw driver, Allen wrench set, crescent wrench, spoke wrench, and a tire repair kit.

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- **Information & Phone Numbers.** Prepare a card or notepad that lists important information and phone numbers for emergencies. This card can be laminated and concealed in the chair (to provide security for children or other vulnerable individuals). The information should contain the following at a minimum:
  - ✓ Your name (and spouse, relative, other contact person) address, phone number;
  - ✓ Your doctor's name and phone number;
  - ✓ Wheelchair make, model and manufacturer's toll free number;
  - ✓ Name and number of the service dealer or local provider who services your chair;
  - ✓ Phone number of the public para-transit service or private wheelchair transport service.

**You can do certain maintenance tasks yourself.**  
**Your service dealer performs more technical tasks.**

With innovative design and features, today's wheelchairs present fewer potential problems; however you still need to be aware of and monitor for common equipment failures. Regular maintenance can help extend the life of your chair and reduce the



number and cost of repairs. Regular service includes keeping the chair clean, checking tires for wear and air pressure, tightening screws, and monitoring for worn out cushions, pads, positioning equipment, and other parts. If you are unsure of performing a procedure or you encounter a problem, contact your service provider.

### **All Wheelchairs**

Keeping your wheelchair clean will not only help keep you healthy and free of infections, but it will make it easier to identify equipment problems as they arise. To keep your wheelchair clean, you can wipe down the surfaces with a damp cloth. Use a mild detergent or a stronger cleaner for stains and sticky spots. Manufacturers often recommend using a car wax on the frame to make regular cleaning easier. Use a sharp tool or pick and carefully clean the wheel axle or caster bearing of any accumulation of hair, string, or other items that can interfere with the rotation of the wheels.

Check the frame for any cracks or breaks in the metal. Any potential problems need to be reported to your wheelchair dealer for repairs. The upholstery also should be monitored for cracks or tears where the fabric folds or where there are screws through the fabric. Any problems related to fabric wear will need to be taken care of by the service dealer. If you rely on a seat cushion, check whether it is still providing the padding and support you need.

Another regular activity is to check all nuts and bolts on the chair to verify that they are tightened (except for the crossbrace pin). If you need to replace any parts, be sure that you are using parts that match those that were supplied by the manufacturer and dealer. Check that all parts that fold, swivel, pivot, and are removable do so easily. For example, be sure that removable arm rests, foot rests, and braces, etc. are working properly. The crossbrace should fold easily without sticking. The center pin should move freely (this bolt is never tightened). Wheelchairs with reclining backs or tilt mechanisms should recline and return to upright without difficulty. Instead of using petroleum oil on your wheelchair, use an all-purpose silicone lube spray to lubricate the flex points on your chair.

Your regular monitoring and maintenance can ensure that your wheelchair is operating safely. Your wheel lock needs to be checked to be sure that it engages and releases properly and does not rub against the tire. The lock needs to operate in such a way that it can be engaged and released without having to use excessive force. Also, the casters (front wheels) can present a safety hazard when they are worn out. Check your casters for cracks in the spokes that may eventually cause the caster to collapse.

### **Power Wheelchairs**

Power wheelchair users can monitor their equipment by ensuring that moving parts are free of entanglements from wires and cords. You can also check that all electrical connections are firmly in place and free of dirt and corrosion. If you loosen or remove any wires, be sure that you reconnect it in the right place. Most power chairs will have color-coded wiring to help prevent errors. An incorrect wiring connection can damage your chair and result in personal injury due to a serious burn.

Your batteries will last longer and perform better if you are careful to keep them charged. Keep track of your battery charge indicator and plug in your charger when the gauge shows less than half a charge. Check with the battery manufacturer for specific charging information.

## Practical Advice

### All wheelchairs

DO	DON'T
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Check your tire pressure; inflation guidelines are on the outside of the tire.</li> <li>• Inflate your tires with a hand pump or bicycle pump.</li> <li>• Check to be sure that your wheel brake does not rub against the tire.</li> <li>• Wash the upholstery with soapy water at least monthly.</li> <li>• Check nuts, bolts, and screws weekly and tighten as needed.</li> <li>• Check the front casters to see that they turn and pivot properly. If caster nut is too tight it will “flutter”(move quickly from side to side); if it is too loose, it will make the chair difficult to steer.</li> <li>• Check your wheel alignment. Glide the rider-less chair on a smooth surface – if the chair veers to either side, report to your dealer for repairs.</li> <li>• Inspect your chair for cracks in the frame –these should be reported to the dealer.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not inflate tires at a gas station –the high pressure can damage your tires.</li> <li>• Do not wash your chair in the shower or at a car wash – excess water/humidity can rust parts.</li> <li>• Do not attempt to oil the bearings on your chair – this requires the care of your wheelchair dealer.</li> <li>• Never use petroleum based oil to lubricate your chair.</li> </ul>

### Power Wheelchairs

DO	DON'T
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wrap a clear plastic bag over your power controls if you must travel in the rain.</li> <li>• Keep your battery charged: If the battery charge indicator is less than ½, plug it in for a recharge.</li> <li>• Listen to your motor and become familiar with the sounds that it makes. You will then notice changes in sound indicating that a belt, bearing or other moving part is malfunctioning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't allow moisture or liquids to come into contact with electronic parts; avoid operating in the rain.</li> <li>• Don't allow your chair to get out of control; turn off the power when transferring or when using a wheelchair lift.</li> <li>• Never allow your battery to discharge (run down) entirely; this may require replacement of the battery.</li> </ul>

## Understand the cost of repairs and maintenance, and what is covered by your health plan.

Your wheelchair will operate more safely and efficiently if you work with your service dealer to get essential maintenance performed on your chair regularly. To avoid unexpected expenses and misunderstandings, it is best if you understand the services that are paid for by your health plan and the services that you will be expected to pay for yourself.

### How repairs are authorized and paid for:

As a general rule, Medicare and/or Medicaid will not pay for routine cleaning, testing, or regular check-ups of your equipment. Your medical equipment dealer will know what charges can be billed to Medicare and Medicaid and what service charges will be your responsibility to pay. The following general coverage restrictions apply:

Medicare	Medicaid
<p><b>Rental</b> wheelchairs, the Medicare rental includes service and maintenance charges. After 15 months of rental, Medicare will pay a fee every 6 months for service/maintenance. (Recipient pays 20% copay)</p> <p><b>Purchased</b> wheelchairs: Medicare pays for reasonable repairs. (Recipient pays 20%)</p> <p><b>Replacement</b> equipment: Medicare pays for replacement equipment if there has been permanent damage, wear and tear, or if your condition changes, resulting in a need for new equipment (A new prescription and Certification of Medical Necessity is required.)</p>	<p><b>Replacement parts and labor charges</b> are generally covered, however some parts may require Prior Authorization (PA). PA is required if the labor time will exceed two hours. PA is also required for any replacement part that is being supplied prior to the expiration of its life expectancy. Your medical equipment dealer submits Prior Authorization requests and is familiar with requirements and life expectancies. A physician's order is required for all Medicaid services and equipment.</p>

### Helpful websites:

“Manual Wheelchair Maintenance” by Alicia Koontz & Rory Cooper in SpinLife.com  
<http://www.spinlife.com/zine/newarticle.cfm?artid=116&typeid=124>

“Power Wheelchair Maintenance Tips” by Gary Karp in Spinlife.com  
<http://www.spinlife.com/spintips/spintipsdetails.cfm?artid=318&typeid=184>

For questions or additional information, please contact Ralph Pelkey, Bureau of Aging and Long Term Care Resources, 1 W. Wilson St., Rm. 450, PO Box 7851, Madison, WI 53707-7851 (608) 267-9091, or email: [pelkerj@dhfs.state.wi.us](mailto:pelkerj@dhfs.state.wi.us).